

# The ABC's of Working with Deaf People

This handout is courtesy of Communications Services for the Deaf.

**Anything from Behind:** Never do anything from behind without first letting the person who is Deaf know you are present. If they are situated away from you, tap their shoulder lightly to get their attention. Never walk up directly behind the Deaf individual. Try to walk around, allowing them to see you and tap them on the shoulder lightly.

**Be Careful with Labels:** Never call the consumer **deaf and dumb** or **hearing impaired!** These labels imply that the Deaf person cannot think or they are broken because they cannot hear. If you note the person's hearing loss in their file, be certain it says **Deaf** or **Hard of Hearing** or **person with a hearing loss**. These are the appropriate terms. Use the term that the individual prefers.

**Communicate and Know:** Be aware of the special needs of the Deaf or Hard of Hearing persons who need to access services. Accessible meetings, captioned video materials, and the provision of interpreter services can help Deaf or Hard of Hearing people access crucial services.

**Don't Shout:** There may be a natural tendency to shout at a person who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing, but it will not improve the person's ability to understand you.

**Eye Contact and Facial Expressions:** Eye contact and facial expressions are very important in Deaf culture. If one doesn't look at the person who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing while talking to them, that person will feel that the hearing person is not interested in what they're saying.

**Goodbyes:** Some people say that long and reluctant goodbyes are part of Deaf culture. Before technology allowed Deaf people to communicate with each other and hearing people more easily, all communication had to take place face to face, and such meetings were often difficult to arrange.

**Group Discussions:** When conversing with groups including Deaf people, be sure to repeat the topic as a courtesy every time someone joins your conversation or group. At meetings it helps to have an agenda on a board or an overhead transparency, and indicate the current item under discussion with arrows to keep everyone together. Focus on one speaker at a time. Have the last speaker acknowledge the next speaker.

**Hand Waving, Foot Stomping and Light Flashing:** When people who are Deaf wave their hands, stomp their feet or flash a light (3 times maximum), it is often an indication of trying to get an individual's attention. It may seem rude or immature but it is very appropriate in Deaf culture to do these actions.

**Idioms:** Idioms are a way in which the words of a particular language are joined together to express thought. (Examples: Paint the town red; don't rock the boat; you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink, don't beat around the bush, etc.) These are very confusing for Deaf individuals. Deaf individuals will directly tell you how they feel in conversation and by the expressions on their faces.

**Interrupting a Signed Conversation:** To interrupt a signed conversation, make your desire known and gesture without waiting for a pause, then stand by without observing the conversation until the person you want to talk to turns to you.

**Jargon:** When using an interpreter, try not to use dialect or language that is unknown, or unfamiliar terms, slang, or technical words that others would not be familiar with. Try to use basic words that get the concept across.

**Keep Pen and Paper Handy:** You will use lots of paper when communicating with Deaf or Hard of Hearing individuals so it might be helpful to keep a clipboard close and secure a pen to it. A dry erase board works well, too.

**Learn a Few Simple Survival Signs:** Keep a sign language chart and finger spelling chart handy.

**Meeting With a Deaf Person:** If you meet with a Deaf individual and you are called out of the room, inform the person that you are leaving and, if possible, why.

**Noise:** Deaf people are not always aware that they are making noise that is disturbing to hearing people. They appreciate knowing this and being told so in a respectful way.

**Obstructions Free From Mouth:** Long mustaches, pens, pencils, cigarettes, hands and gum, etc. The Deaf or Hard of Hearing client might think you are talking to them, but you may only be chewing gum. Be considerate and keep things out of your mouth.

**Phone Access:** Be aware that any agency attempting to work with Deaf or Hard of Hearing persons should be accessible by TTY. Agencies should purchase or lease TTY equipment and see that staff members are trained in appropriate use.

**Qualified Interpreter Should Be Used:** If you are not fluent in sign language, always use a qualified interpreter for assessment, evaluation, counseling, or advocacy. This means that the interpreter is trained, certified by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf or the National Association for the Deaf or another state's certification. Never use a family member like a son, daughter, wife, husband, or partner.

**Refer:** Using the principles of cross-cultural counseling, be sure to refer Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons to qualified professionals or agencies if you are not able to meet their communication and cultural needs.

**Speech-Reading:** People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing who are more familiar with the English language will be more able to speech-read (lip-read) with more ease than an individual who is not. Only 20% of all speech is visible on the lips. This means that out of a sentence of 10 words, a Deaf individual would be able to read only 2 words, maybe more if the Deaf person knew the context of the sentence.

**Speak Normally:** Try not to exaggerate your mouth movements. Slow down a little bit and separate your words. Exaggerated mouth movements will not improve the Deaf person's ability to understand you.

**Support:** Support the provision of funds that support special programming for Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons.

**Training:** Take advantage of training opportunities to learn more about the needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people in relation to domestic violence. Provide training for Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons who want to work in the domestic violence field.

**Use a Closed Caption Decoder With the Television:** This will allow the person who is Deaf to share in social activities surrounding television, assuming that the program being viewed is captioned.

**Use Local Deaf Resources:** Access information from local resources about agencies in your area that serve Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons.

**Visual Environments:** Visual factors are critical in maximizing communication with a person who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Be sensitive to this by **adjusting lighting** and **using visual aids** like pictures and charts when explaining things other than auditory cues and reassurances. Be **careful about rooms with flowered or loud wallpaper**. Consider the Deaf individual who would be trying to watch an interpreter against such a loud wall. It may affect the Deaf person's eyes. **Seats should not be too close**—they need enough room for signing space. Also, any **big centerpieces or any large objects on the table** should be removed so they do not block conversation.

**Walking Through/Around a Conversation:** If you encounter two Deaf people having a conversation, see if there is a path around them; if not, walk quickly and unobtrusively between them, signing "excuse me," whether or not the two having the conversation see it. There is no need to duck or crawl around. Another way to approach this situation is to touch the back of one of the Deaf individuals so they can step forward and allow you to go through behind them.

**Written Communication:** There are times when it is necessary and appropriate to write notes to a person who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing. It is time consuming and the writer may abbreviate some of the important information that is exchanged. This is not appropriate for long periods of time. It would be inappropriate in situations such as counseling or therapy of some kind.

**XXXX:** This is used when typing on the TTY and a mistake has been made. Instead of backspacing, Deaf individuals tend to type XXXX and go on.

**You Can Do It:** Just remember that you will be successful at working with Deaf individuals. Just be genuine and treat them just as you would want to be treated.

**Zestrool:** This is a Deaf term used to describe when a group of hearing people are sitting around and laughing and the Deaf individual laughs too, but does not really understand at all why he/she is laughing.

**WHEN IN DOUBT, ASK THE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING PERSON FOR SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION.**

**For more information about working with Deaf or Hard of Hearing individuals, please contact:**

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